

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Oct 23rd 2013

Both of today's readings—from Paul writing to the Christians in Rome and Luke passing on a parable about a household manager—are full of talk about slaves and slavery. For those of us who grew up hearing earlier English translations referring to servants, this use of slave imagery can be shocking. Now we hear Paul even describing himself as a slave of Christ, where before we heard him call himself a servant of Christ. We even hear Jesus himself using that image: “Whoever will be first among you will be the slave of all” (Mark 10:44). There is no doubt that the Greek word *doulos*, which was often translated ‘servant’ (because first-century servants were mainly slaves), really means ‘slave.’ But the move from servant-talk to slave-talk sounds like we are giving in to Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity as a call to adopt a demeaning slave mentality.

What do Paul and Jesus and Luke mean by this (unattractive, embarrassing?) slave imagery? I would summarize the meaning in this way. Every human being, consciously or unconsciously, allows himself or herself to be governed by something. In that sense, we are all “slaves” to something. Think of the possibilities: one can organize one’s life around making money, or around maintaining the best possible physical health, or about gaining more and more power over other people, or about having the most “toys,” or about achieving vengeance over enemies, or about raising a family, or about excelling as an artist or an athlete or a scholar; and this is just a sampling. Obviously, some of these things are sinister and others are good. But, good or evil, if any one of these things becomes the sole focus of our allegiance, we are “enslaved” to that thing or person. The only way to freedom is to become “enslaved” to the One who loves us completely—God. Then everything else falls into place. That is why Jesus says that total allegiance to God (as taught by Deuteronomy 6:4 and recited daily in the Jewish tradition and expressed by Christians in the Lord’s Prayer (thy kingdom come, thy will be done) is the “first commandment” and one way to freedom.

This paradox is the reason that Jesus, in today’s parable, can symbolize our human situation as like that of a steward (or head household slave), who has been given authority or responsibility over others in the household to implement the flourishing of the household as a whole. And that is why the greatest temptation for us stewards is to forget that we are servants of the Master of the household and fall for the delusion that we ourselves are the master of the house. When we discover the liberty of being “slaves of God” becoming “slaves” of one another (Jesus’ expression) is no bondage at all but a sharing of the love of God.

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